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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between ideology and speech patterns in Modern Israeli Hebrew. Eighty native speakers of university age were provided with descriptions of events in which some desired object or information was the goal, then asked what they would say to attain the goal and to construct examples of stylized uses of speech for each of the events. After each response, they were also asked to describe the way in which they had spoken and explain their descriptions. Results indicate significant differences in the ways in which polite speech was performed, evaluated, and explained. Two explanations for the differences are offered: (1) speaker's ethnic background and gender; and (2) ideological forces working against certain Western forms of politeness. Analysis focuses on the roots of these ideologies in early Zionism and on their fading influence in Israel's current political context. (MSE)

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Zionism and the Fate of 'Politeness' in Modern Israeli Hebrew

Abstract

In an empirical attempt to get at how linguistic forms and contextual variables are interrelated in the use of a speaking style such as politeness in Modern Israeli Hebrew, eighty native-born speakers of university age were interviewed. They were provided with descriptions of events in which some desired object or information was the goal and then asked what they would say in order to obtain that goal. After providing what they believed they would say in such a situation, they were asked to construct examples of stylized uses of speech for each of the events. After each response, they were also asked to describe the way in which they had spoken and explain why they described it as they did. Results show that there are significant differences in the ways in which speaking politely was performed, evaluated and explained by these speakers. These differences can be partially accounted for in two different ways. First, there are significant differences based on the speaker's ethnic background and gender. Second, working in conjunction with the first, there are ideological forces which work against particular types of Western forms of politeness. This paper focuses on the roots of these ideologies in early Zionism and on their arguably fading influence in the light of statistically-significant different usage rates among different types of speakers and the contemporary political situation in Israel as it emerges within the conscious reflections of Israelis on this way of speaking.

Proceedings Abstract

This paper attempts to account for significant differences in the ways in which eighty native-born Israeli speakers of university age perform, evaluate and explain 'politeness' in Modern Israeli Hebrew. The explanatory focus falls on the ideological role of early Zionism, which put certain kinds of Western politeness into disfavor.

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Perhaps it is a good thing that I'm going last. As I'm sure most of us have heard -- and I hope you'll allow me a bit of editing given the context here -- find a room with 9 Jews in it and you'll find at least 10 opinions. Well, in that spirit, as that ninth Jew as it were, I'd like to first locate myself in approach, not really opinion, in relation to the organizing themes of this colloquium. And then, given my 15 minutes, rush off and try to tell two stories which each make a single relevant point. If my past conference experiences are any measure, if I can manage this, it will in fact be something of an achievement for me! If nothing else, in all seriousness, I hope to at least generate some ideas that in the larger context of this colloquium might spur on some related questions afterwards.

I stand before you today primarily as an anthropological linguist. That is, I'm interested in formulating regularities about culture - or, the process of meaning creation which characterizes human groups in social interaction. More specifically, I am interested in how individuals rely on various kinds of social knowledges and cultural ideologies to arrive at culturally-coherent interpretations of social interactions. How, I want to understand, do individuals interpret or contextualize the meanings of things on the fly, as it were? As a linguist, with semiotic interests, I'm interested in the role of language in this process and in language itself as a significant, culturally-informed kind of behavior. Emerging from these general interests -- and borrowing, stealing and generally adapting theoretical work on the contextualization of language, I set off for Israel about 10 years ago with a theoretical model in hand. I set off, as many have before me, in search of a type of behavior which was mediated linguistically, relevant as a topic in my field, and likely to relate in interesting ways to broader cultural ideologies and values in Israel. I ultimately decided on -- in a sort of 'believe it or not' for those of you who have actually been to Israel -- the communication of politeness.

One of the explicit organizing themes here today, perhaps the dominant one, asks a very interesting and legitimate question. How have institutional and societal processes both constrained and enabled both the role of the Jewish researcher and the consideration of Jewish peoples within the all-too-human institution of academics. The other explicit organizing theme here today focuses on the ways in which identities are constructed in discourse. This general theme is well-suited to my work. Though this might be something of an accident as I did not work with transcripts of 'natural' discourses, but rather with discursive constructions as they were relayed to me in the context or confines, depending on your theoretical leanings, of ethnographic interviews. Either way, I have had a long running interest in exploring how specific identities are relevant to the web of meanings involved in 'communicating politeness in Modern Israeli Hebrew' (as I and nobody else likes to call it). Speaking certain ways, no surprise, is aligned with -- often via ideological and rationalizing cultural supports -- particular kinds of social identities. Indeed, how language marks -- to be as theoretically neutral as possible -- identities in discourse has become a central part of my project. Thus, though I fear I have little to contribute to the first, arguably dominant theme today, I believe I do have a story or two which is relevant to the latter. More generally, I do believe that I have much to say about the cultural processes surrounding, informing and sometimes even dictating the constructed meanings of human actions. The relevant story here then, if nothing else, is perhaps somewhat anti-climatic in comparison with the other papers presented today. I am here to report and even suggestively document how incredibly normal -- though I wouldn't say regular -- Jews are in comparison with other social groups. Like individuals in all other social groups, as we will see, they are often drawn to particular kinds of contextualizing interpretations based on their socio-cultural 'interests'. This is of concern to me as a social scientist in an attempt to find regularities in the study of cultural phenomena.

Before turning to the particular stories which I want to tell here today, allow me to give you the relevant methodological details of this study. I'll simply read here from my somewhat surprisingly trusty abstract for this paper. In an empirical attempt to get at how linguistic forms and contextual variables are interrelated in the use of a speaking style such as politeness in Modern Israeli Hebrew, eighty-two native-born speakers of university age were interviewed. They were provided with descriptions of events in which some desired object or information was the goal and then asked what they would say in order to obtain that goal. After providing what they believed they would say in such a situation, they were asked to construct examples of stylized uses of speech for each of the events -- in particular, instances of direct, indirect, polite and impolite speech. After each response, they were also asked to describe in functional terms the ways in which they had spoken and explain why they described their responses as they had. Finally, after being told explicitly that I was interested in learning more about polite speech in Hebrew, they were asked a series of questions which attempted to get out what they consciously knew and thought about this particular style and its typical speakers.

As one might expect, many different stories emerged from this research project. I could list for you a seemingly endless series of results demonstrating that there are statistically-significant differences in the ways in which speaking politely was performed, evaluated and explained by different social categories of speakers. Indeed though today I'll focus on speaker ethnicity, similar stories could be told about other identities, such as gender to name but one. Returning to our concerns here today, however, I believe that only two of these stories, as I said above, are relevant. For both, in the name of time (or rather the absence thereof), I'll simply make the claim and do the best I can to suggestively document them for you by example, given my limited time here today. Indeed, throughout, given these time constraints, I'll simply provide the results in qualitative rather than numeric form. For today at least, you'll just have to trust me that all of the results reported

here can be backed up by statistically-significant quantitative analyses. Let us move to each now in turn.

The statistically-based, empirical approach, described above, allowed me to uncover many different linguistic signs and contextual factors which were significantly correlated with communications of politeness. Two broad classes of signs, however, are particularly interesting for us here today. I have labeled the first 'Inexplicitness' and the second 'Interpersonal Mediation'. Examples from the first include the use of a plural noun when the singular is clearly the topic of discourse or the use of a plural person in pronoun and verb when clearly a singular person is topically relevant. Examples from the second are more diverse and include both the set of 'magically' and ideologically-defined forms, such as 'please' and 'thank you', as well as a vast, partially normative set of typically adverbial expressions, similar to those found in English, like 'if you don't mind' and 'if it is possible'. In the time I have here today, this basic idea will just have to do. Both of these broadly defined classes, however, occurred significantly in responses which were reported to be polite. The more interesting question, of course, is why.

Though both sets can be said to regularly serve a pragmatic function of politeness, they were distinct in other aspects of their pragmatic signaling. The latter class of 'interpersonal mediators' pragmatically indexed, holding all else constant, a particular ethnic speaker identity, that of Ashkenazis (or Jews with roots primarily in Europe). Again, we should ask why. This fact is an interesting lesson in the coherences of cultural forms and functions in and of itself. On one hand, these forms tended to be longer formal units, which were not ideologically defined as legitimate grammatical units. As a result, native speakers tended to be more consciously aware of these forms as being pragmatically related to politeness. In the whirl of factors competing for alleged causes and effects, it would be remiss of us not to notice the fact that there is also a language-independent stereotype of Ashkenazi speakers which also supports this pragmatic mode of signaling. Ashkenazi

speakers, I learned, are thought of as colder and more formal people. This then motivates, in the world of cultural logics, the fact that these forms are a specifically Ashkenazi type of politeness. One, as we will see, which Sephardi speakers (or those with ethnic roots in Africa or Asia) systematically rejected. Amazingly, then, one aspect of culture thus makes another conscious aspect 'coherent' in ways that make perfect system-internal sense. Signs of interpersonal mediation are coherently rationalized in terms of a language-independent social stereotype about Ashkenazi speakers.

Note, of course, that there is no reason to assume that this is empirically the case. Stereotypes, however, crude as they may be, are sometimes empirically 'true' (with a small t). Indeed that is the case here as, all other things being equal, Ashkenazi speakers used these forms more than Sephardi speakers. Indeed, given the general lack of conscious awareness of other markers of polite speaking, the whole style has something of an Ashkenazi feel to it. This conveniently leads us to our second story.

Here, then, we finally arrive at the promised topic of Zionism. But before this point is made, let me make clear what I mean by Zionism in this context. I do not mean the particular set of principled views that would emerge from a careful study of the leaders of this social movement. Rather - in a sort of ironic ode to High School teachers everywhere - I mean the set of not-so-structured beliefs and stories which are taught in schools often enough and repeated or relied upon in other ritual and non-ritual settings such that they become what we often like to call 'common knowledge'. When asked to consciously reflect on politeness, a surprising number of informants began to tell me stories about how things used to be and about Zionism in particular. 'Back then', as I was so often told -- and of course we need not concern ourselves with how 'true' such an account actually was -- speaking directly and honestly was valued and 'everybody did it'. Things were difficult and there wasn't time for the fancy talk of the Jews as it had existed in Europe. Talk had to

be to the point in order for everybody to understand each other, build a nation and feel unity.

As an aside, I should note, even though we wouldn't want to assume that this story is 'really' true, early Zionist ideology as one input into a set of emerging Israeli values had, as ideologies go, a very successful influence on Hebrew. It did much to wipe out imported translations of basic 'polite' kinds of question forms, as they existed in various European languages. Compare our own 'Can you help me?' when, as any good Israeli will tell you, we really mean, 'Will you help me?', or better, 'Help me'. Thus, the unmarked form of questions in Modern Israeli Hebrew is indeed just the declarative with rising intonation. Even today, grammaticalized categories encoding politeness and general politeness formulas are relatively absent from Modern Israeli Hebrew, even today. Similarly, those linguistic additions which do mark an utterance as polite were largely imported translations from various European languages and, more to the point, as we've already seen above, they never lost their association with what is today reconstructed as a specific ethnicity.

It is perhaps just this relative degree of success which explains the high degree of overlap in the various stories which the informants told me. Interestingly, however, if not too surprisingly, different versions pick up emerge when they spoke about what is happening 'now'. Here again, ethnicity is a good predictor of the variant of the stories that emerge. Here too we begin to see the ever-changing nature of politeness as a socio-cultural act in the larger context of an Israel in contemporary times. Indeed, the stories are a nice index of the different 'stories' going around. In telling me about politeness, it was interesting to note the degree to which one could read the different partially ethnicized political perspectives of my informants.

Let me run through this in machine-gun style as time is quickly fading. I'll give you the piece of the narrative and the kinds of facts that support it. Almost all Israelis understand that in a sort of supra-national system of stereotypes they are decidedly not very

polite. Sephardi speakers tended to take pride in this. Ashkenazi speakers tended to take only a begrudging pride in this fact and/or moaned about how much they personally suffer for being 'too polite'. While not a single Israeli thought that politeness should be completely erased in their children's generation and thus wanted to teach something about it to their children, Sephardis were much more apt to say that only the minimum necessary to get what you need was the ideal and urged against 'interpersonal' uses as being dishonest, cold and too formal. I hope you are hearing the ethnically-charged potential here. Indeed, two other broadly contextual facts are relevant to these stories. First, as is well-known, nobody even pretends anymore that Israel is a clear and single unified entity. Political difficulties, to put in mildly, are known to all, as are the various discourses and debates which partially define this dilemma. Second, in ways comparable to the United States, ethnicity itself has been politicized. These cultural facts given, ritualized honesty as a group value, as I was often told, no longer links up so nicely with community-based Zionist ideals. Rather, and here both accounts and evaluations split, it is becoming either a sign of pride for ethnically-defined 'individuals' or a new kind of national 'Israeli' identity which justifies this kind of directness not in terms of a community project, but rather in terms of 'getting your piece of the pie' or, more generally, in terms of community-internal difficulties. Or, for the particularly die-hard Ashkenazis, it is a sad sign of the end of a beautiful time in Israeli history and the death of beautifully-shared cultural values, which is often then amazingly read into the current political crises as a cause!

Consider one final interesting place in which much of this material showed up for essentially all of the informants -- and remember they were all of similar age. They all more or less accepted the stereotype that older speakers are more polite than younger speakers. Indeed, this was one of the primary questions which brought out the stories above. Contrast this fact to the results obtained when they were asked to discuss if Ashkenazis were more polite than Sephardis! The link to ethnicity as it relates to larger political

discourses was clearly in the air as here too I ended up getting many of the above predictably distinct viewpoints from the informants in the form of a lecture.

One interesting, but certainly not final, question here then is the future of this style in Israel. The reasons we can see for bonding or believing in a sort of anti-polite style of ritual honesty differ for different classes of speakers. Politeness in Israel -- itself a sort of accidental translation from European languages -- was coherently rejected by early Zionists and the opposing value was successfully transmitted to a wide variety of Israelis. So much so, as I noted, that self-described polite Israelis are often embarrassed and self-described direct Israelis often claim that the only real politeness is to speak directly! The fate of this earlier cultural web of meanings, however, seems as if it, like the larger political context surrounding and informing it, could go in any number of ways. Here I fear even an artistically-informed view of social science fails to be much predictive help. Might a new decidedly Sephardi mode of speaking become a cool model for a new religious-national identity? And note, this isn't so crazy a prediction in comparison with the US, when one remembers that Sephardis are close to half the population. Might the anti-style value simply fade into historical memory as the Americanization of Israel continues? It is too hard a call to make at this point. Though for those of us, like myself, who are interested, all we can do is to continue to read the signs. To search out the socially institutionalized patterns as they are informed by larger contextual discourses and wait for more stable patterns to emerge. In that spirit, allow me to close with a final example. Having brought you into the nightmare of contemporary Israeli politics in telling my supposedly tame linguistic story about politeness, let me lead you out of this talk and this colloquium as I began, with something of a joke. This joke, I should add, is one that Israelis love telling in mixed company. Mixed company here, of course, means among non-Israelis -- meaning, closer to home, 'me'. That is to say, as that old expression goes, if only I had a shekel for every time I was told it anew. Well, it goes a little something like this ...

A reporter approached different people on the streets of Tel Aviv and asked, 'What do you think of the recent food shortage in Africa?'

In response, the American asked: What's a shortage?

The Russian asked: What's food?

The Chinese person asked: What's 'think'?

and the Israeli, of course, asked: What's 'please'?

Funny, to be sure, but a sign of a cultural construction which will perhaps play an important role in the future of politeness in Modern Israel. Having found signs relating to language and culture, of course, I'm happy either way. Thank you.